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2016

Tepora , T 2016 , ' Emotional War? Communicating the Cultural Histories of War to a Wider Audience ' , Revue Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine , vol. 47 , no. 2 , pp. 161-172 . <
<https://www.journalbelgianhistory.be/en/author/tuomas-tepora> >

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/232278>

publishedVersion

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Emotional war ? Communicating the cultural histories of war to a wider audience

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When one browses the shelves of a bookshop, it becomes evident that military history enjoys wide and sustainable popularity among the reading public. There might be regional, national, cultural and temporal variation in the areas of interest but one thing seems clear from a European or Western perspective : the two world wars of the twentieth century dominate popular history narratives and public memory – as well as much academic research.

The role of past wars and battles, glorious victories and bitter(sweet) defeats in histories of nations and their identities has been a staple of nationalism studies and memory studies for decades. The commemoration of wars and war-related politics of history are transnational phenomena. There are few nations or groups that have claimed sovereignty whose hegemonic narratives have not been grounded in violent struggle for freedom and the defence of national borders. In the politics of nationalistic identity, the victorious heroes and the defeated seem to be equal. Both sides possess valuable building blocks for collective identities.

Yet, as noted, warfare is essentially a transnational activity and the possibilities for the study and teaching of military history transcend national boundaries. In addition, the cultures of war, various experiences, emotional histories, trauma studies and studies on gender and warfare, just to name a

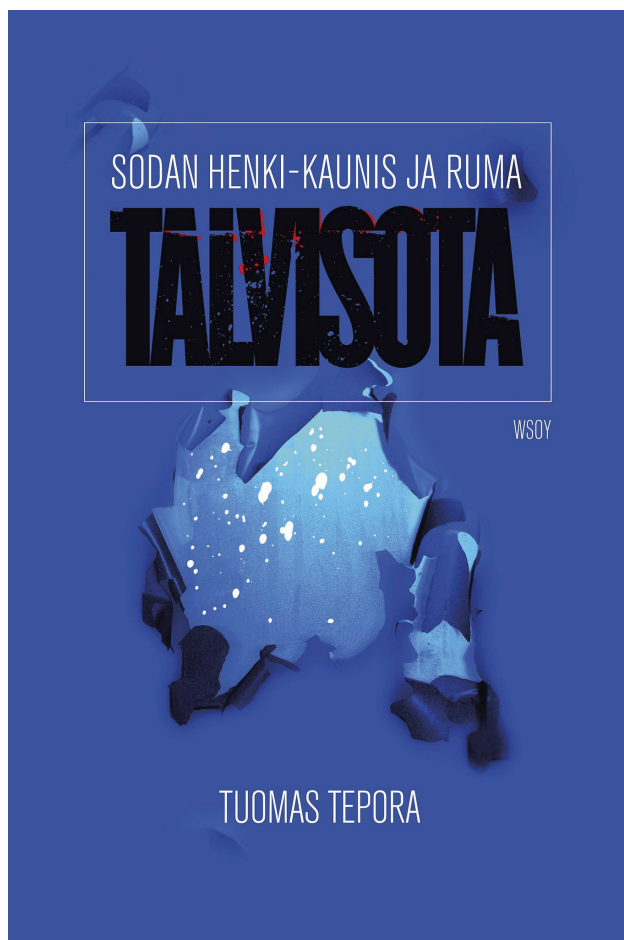
few, have enriched our understanding about wartime histories and have been included in academic curricula.

What about popular histories ? How can academic advances be communicated to a wider audience ? How have the histories of traumatic war experiences, for instance, been received by the general public ? My case study is Finland, where the shift from rather old-fashioned military and political history to a broader set of approaches, took place relatively late, in the mid-2000s, and is still making its impact among the public at large.

Old versus new

First, a short introduction into the differences between the “old” and “new” approaches to military history (in fact the “new” cultural and social approaches are hardly new but are products of the social constructivist advances in the humanities in the 1960s and 70s.)

One thing in common with these approaches to military history, is that, whereas traditional combat and strategy-oriented military history is first and foremost concerned with combat and strategy, the cultural, social and emotional histories of war have often come struck by the insight that the two world wars have greatly influenced the emotional styles in a given society or, indeed, some previous cultural mores regarding emotional expression have contributed to wartime experience. For instance, the British notion of ‘stiff upper lip’ was a late-nineteenth-century construct of the era of the Empire that reached its peak in the world wars and saw a gradual decline in the post-war period. The myth of the Blitz may seem to reflect nostalgically the pinnacle of the stiff upper lip, but in reality the Second World War marked the swansong of this idea



The front cover of Sodan henki, designed by Pekka Loiri. Sodan henki (2015), The Spirit of War, is the first portrayal of the history of emotions of the Winter War. The book traces the origins and various legacies of one of the most revered national myths.

before it gave in to the new-found liberation of emotional expression³².

Old-fashioned military history has, sometimes explicitly, at other times implicitly or even unwillingly, contributed to hegemonic national narratives. Military historians, the state and the armed forces have a long history of co-operation. A major share of military history has been researched and taught in military colleges. Some academics have scorned the perceived “unacademic” qualities of military history and the problems that arise when the state institution of the army conducts its own research into itself. Historians who adhere to the cultural and social history of warfare do not generally want to see themselves as the political tools of the state.

In addition, and in spite of an intensifying dialogue between the disciplines³³, it may be true that one rarely meets a military historian who is fluent in recent advances in gender studies or the history of emotions or some other trendy area of Academia. This is one reason why interdisciplinary war studies are welcomed by many academics who are interested in the short- and long-term impact that crises cause in culture and society. The effects of war do not begin when the fighting erupts, nor do they end when arms are laid down.

In a nutshell, “traditional” military history has concentrated on military and political

leaders, geopolitics, strategy, combat and rearmament. The “new military history” has been composed of various cultural and social aspects of war that can often be labelled as interdisciplinary, including for instance the literary, anthropological, commemorative, artistic history of warfare, as well as the history of emotions in warfare³⁴.

By the end of the twentieth century, the cultural history of war³⁴ had established itself as a field of history in many of the Western societies. The shift did not happen in a vacuum, however. It became possible during the “Cold Peace” of the post-Second World War era that saw major social innovations. These changes encouraged fresh and critical insights into the world wars and war in general. The “old” military history became one of the scapegoats of the conservative social system. Not everywhere, though.

Traditional military history as a reservoir of national sentiment : the Finnish case

As a case study, in my native Finland popular military history, especially war-related conservative political history, enjoys a wide popularity that is rooted in the rather short history of Finland as a sovereign nation³⁵. Predominant collective identities and politics of history are based on a Second World War narrative that emphasises small-nation struggle against totalitarian superpower, the Soviet Union. The importance of this narrative is magnified because it masked the

32. THOMAS DIXON, *Weeping Britannia : Portrait of a Nation in Tears*, Oxford, 2015, p.199-214, 230-245, 249-278; see also ANGUS CALDER, *The Myth of the Blitz*, London, 1991. 33. A good example on the pairing of traditional military history and cultural approaches is JUSSI JALONEN, *On Behalf of the Emperor, On Behalf of the Fatherland : Finnish Officers and Soldiers of the Russian Imperial Life-Guard on the Battlefields of Poland, 1831*, Leiden/Boston, 2015.

34. For a short but comprehensive overview on the “new military history”, see JOANNA BOURKE, “New Military History”, in MATTHEW HUGHES & WILLIAM J. PHIBOTT (eds.), *Palgrave Advances in Modern Military History*, Basingstoke, 2006. 35. “Conservative” refers here both to political conservatism and a restricted understanding of the politics as stately affairs.

bloody beginnings of the nation almost 100 years ago. The Civil War of 1918, a class conflict that divided Finland's society sharply in two, caused the death of more than one per cent of the population in just six months. Such divisive violence could not form a viable foundational myth for the nation. Although a gradual harmonisation had begun in the interwar period in the society that had retained its parliamentary system, it was the perceived and experienced unification during the Winter War (1939-40) that was adopted as a new and viable foundational myth already during the Russo-Finnish conflict in question.

Subsequent popular narratives, especially those constructed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, have fitted the later, politically controversial phases of the Second World War into the Winter War theme. This story emphasises a victimhood that was not passive but active and justifiable as self-defence. Finns as perpetrators and Finland as a *de facto* ally of the Third Reich from 1941 until 1944 do not generally appear in predominant popular narratives and collective identity politics.

During the Cold War era, military history was preserved as a conservative discipline. It can be argued that the usual strictly operative narrative of military history acted as a form of nationalistic resistance in a country that had been overshadowed by the constraints the Soviet Union posed for public discourses and where other sectors of

society and academia had adopted a more "progressive" stance. Conservative, strategy-oriented military history perhaps acted for many people as a safe haven, where one could maintain pride regarding the successful defence of the nation and play down the problematic alliance that had existed with Germany.

The 1990s, in turn, saw a so-called neopatriotic shift regarding the remembrance of the Second World War. In the late 1990s, when secondary-school pupils who had been born in 1980 answered a questionnaire about their historical consciousness, the only historical event in Finnish history that formed a coherent picture in their youthful minds was the Second World War. What was that picture like? The educated youth of the 1990s overwhelmingly understood the Finnish participation in the Second World War as a great success story, evincing the resilience and collective pride at a kind of David versus Goliath situation. In the late-1990s Finnish society was recuperating from a massive recession and the economy was on the rise. Many of the youth had connected the Finnish war effort with expected successes in the future. It had become part of their identity, a textbook example of how collective and individual identities feed off each other³⁶. Interestingly, during the 1990s, people of my generation often identified themselves as more conservative than their parents. For Finland, the collapse of the Soviet Union marked the real end to the War, 50 years after its conclusion. Patriotic military history was celebrated and heroic popular histories abounded.

36. SIRKKA AHONEN, *Historiaton sukupolvi? Historian vastaanotto ja historiallisen identiteetin rakentuminen 1990-luvun nuorison keskuudessa* [A Generation without History? The Reception of History and the Construction of a Historical Identity among the 1990s Youth], Helsinki, 1998, p. 74-89, 120-123, 171-172; see also PILVI TORSTI, *Suomalaiset ja historia* [The Finns and History], Helsinki, 2012, p.135-155.



The front cover of Murtuneet mielet, designed by Mika Tuominen. Murtuneet mielet (2013), Broken Minds, became a huge success among the reading public. The book's portrayal of psychiatric symptoms of Finnish soldiers of the Second World War was an eye-opener for many readers)

Thus the cultural and “new military history” shift did not properly take place in Finland until the early twenty-first century and one of its initial impetuses was the critique of “nationalistic” historiography and old-fashioned military history³⁷. The Finnish example reveals the intrinsic relationship that military histories and the state have. Whether old or new, military history becomes an easily politicised discipline.

In a small civil society where even academic war-related historiography is consumed by the reading public, those with an inclination for writing critically for a wider audience have to find ways to communicate their thoughts through the usual fuss and certain prejudices. I have recently published material on the history of emotions of the Winter War for the general public, with a focus on how unification during the Winter War was expressed and propagated and how it started to crumble after the conflict³⁸. Some of the first public reactions to the book often deemed the theme conservative and traditional – it is the Winter War after all, what is there left to look at ? “You must be very patriotic”. When I pointed out that I wanted to shake the myth, see how the “spirit of the Winter War” came about, who controlled it, what sort of cracks were there in the feeling and how its legacy became politicised, I often received concerned looks. “You are not going to debunk the myth, are you ?” To be fair, the majority of the reader feedback has been positive, sometimes somewhat relieved. For example, a couple of readers told me face-to-face, that they saw me

wanting to make cracks in the myth and expressed relief that I did not succeed. They liked the book, however, I suppose. Writing about the emotional side the war is a tricky business. Both readers and the media often interpret one either as a traditionalist or a radical.

But where do the prejudices come from ? Are the readers of popular military or home-front histories not ready for novel insights or are they predisposed to be given a certain interpretation ? Or could it be the case, as I suspect is surprisingly common, that the critics of popular military histories act as conservative gatekeepers between writers and readers ? First, I will take a look at the latter option; it is easier to decipher.

There are two identifiable strategies used to downplay popular histories that employ a “new military history” approach. For example, a work that addresses rank-and-file grievances and their other-than-patriotic motives might be criticised for lacking, or even misunderstanding, the “big picture”, that is the survival narrative of Finland. This strategy is, however, becoming less prevalent. The passage of time and more diverse identities have diminished the public need for defending clear-cut memory politics of the heroic war effort. Much more challenging is to overcome the expectations of the critics, who are literate in traditional political history. Accordingly, many of them expect war-related historiography to be political history. If it is not, it has traditionally been handled

37. TIINA KINNUNEN & MARKKU JOKISIPILÄ, “Shifting Images of ‘Our Wars’ : Finnish Memory Culture of World War II”, in TIINA KINNUNEN & VILLE KIVIMÄKI (eds.), *Finland in World War II : History, Memory, Interpretations*, Leiden/Boston, 2012; VILLE KIVIMÄKI, “Between Defeat and Victory : Finnish Memory Culture of the Second World War”, in *Scandinavian Journal of History* 37, 2012, 4, p.482-504. 38. TUOMAS TEPPORÄ, *Sodan henki. Kaunis ja ruma talvisota* [The Spirit of War : The Beautiful, Ugly Winter War], Helsinki, 2015.

as historiography that concerns women and children, or aspects that are not important in the big picture. Critical insights delivered in the form and style of political history might be accepted more easily than a newer way of research (and there have been major advances in the writing of wartime political history intended for a general audience during past 15 years)³⁹. Obviously, this concerns the reading public as well.

What is the problem, then? I think the problem arises from the fact that the high status of political history continues the legacy of the Cold War era and thus contributes to the ongoing Finnish survival narrative that effectively downplays other narratives. Political history in the context of Finnish wartime concerns itself with difficult choices and inescapable geopolitics but usually leaves wider social and cultural consequences untouched. Even works of arguably lesser quality in the field of political history often receive more public interest at the expense of cultural approaches. This will probably change in time but meanwhile, the domination of political history limits the public's access to other ways of approaching popular history. To avoid scapegoating the critics, or the public, it should be added that the "illiteracy" of the critics is also due to the relative lack of "new military history" intended for a wider audience. It is just starting to make its breakthrough in Finland.

As it is, readers are interested in both "old" and "new" military histories and many of

them sell well. Indeed, the most visible of the new approaches have been studies on shellshock and trauma, as well as the histories of home-front experiences. The best-selling non-fiction book in 2013 in fact dealt with war psychiatry and traumatised servicemen. The book *Broken Minds* (*Murtuneet mielet*) also received the most distinguished national literary award for non-fiction. Based on a PhD dissertation, it was a prime example of how academic research was transformed into exemplary popular history⁴⁰. The book connected new insights from the history of emotions to trauma studies. The author, Ville Kivimäki, argued persuasively for culturally shaped trauma symptoms and participated in transnational discussions about the nature of war trauma, but for the reading public the catch was not there. For example, the book provided many readers with a way to connect with their family memories and, essentially, silences around war experiences. The book was by no means a first attempt to look at the Finnish war effort from an angle that rendered the traditional, political "survival narrative" irrelevant. Nevertheless, *Broken Minds* became a huge, eye-opening success among both readers and critics. Why?

This example illustrates the apparent predisposition of a reading public that has become suspicious and tired of armed forces and state-oriented military and political history. In addition to the obvious merits of the book, the public has interpreted it in the context of a Western therapy culture that has contributed to the public interest

39. For an overview, see KINNUNEN & JOKISIPIÄ 2012. 40. VILLE KIVIMÄKI, *Battled Nerves : Finnish Soldiers' War Experience, Trauma, and Military Psychiatry, 1941-44*, Turku, Åbo Akademi University, 2013; Id., *Murtuneet mielet. Taistelu suomalaissotilaiden hermoista 1939-1945* [*Broken Minds : Battled Nerves of the Finnish Soldiers*], Helsinki, 2013.



An air raid of Mikkeli on 5 January 1940 has hit a local textile shop. The headquarters of the Finnish armed forces were based in the town during the Second World War. SA-kuva. (Finnish Armed Forces photograph Archive)

in emotional experiences, expression, and the idea of transgenerational trauma⁴¹. In academic circles transgenerational trauma is a contentious but very interesting concept; difficult experiences are transferred from one generation to another culturally, in child-rearing practices or even epigenetically.

In Finnish public discourse the traumatised servicemen, however, became the forebears of “our” collective, contemporary, unworked trauma. In other words, whereas the conservative gaze at the wartime past sees the Finnish war effort primarily as a success in defence and heralds a collective heroism in noble victimhood, the trauma discourse has transformed the wartime past into the founding trauma and the newly sparked discussion as the first attempts at initiating a “healing process”. Some popular narratives even trace contemporary social problems, such as drinking and a slightly higher prevalence of violence than in Western Europe, back to war experiences without meaningful comparison to other European war experiences⁴². There is not necessarily anything untruthful in these dominant discussions. However, in both cases the focus often turns on “our” suffering.

An introspective therapy culture, coupled with the sob stories of the media, has flourished in Finland as typified in the West during the

past decade or two⁴³, and psychologically tuned debates on war trauma have been in the media since the turn of the millennium, but suddenly, as we entered the current decade, the media was overwhelmed with references to war-related trauma. “Trauma” is a politicised concept, obviously, but in this decade Finnish debates have become something more. On the one hand, old-fashioned memory politics has continued to emphasise the patriotic heritage of the Second World War in retaining sovereignty and investing Finns with collective pride. On the other hand, the public witnesses an outcry for an on-going healing and collective introspection without which the nation cannot leave its nerve-shattering experiences behind. In the process, the analytic value of the concept of “trauma” has evaporated into the mediasphere.

I think this bipolar constellation aptly illustrates the challenges facing historians who are writing for a wide audience. The prevalent media discussions steer the public interpretation of popular military historiography. It is easily labelled as “conservative” or “new”, “patriotic” or “intentionally critical”. Polemic headlines sell books. Inevitably, writing for a wide audience raises ethical questions. Publishing houses and authors alike are tempted to

41. Discussion about shellshock started late in Finland in comparison to Europe, partly because the syndrome was not recognised in Finnish society before the Second World War. Finland experienced the Civil War in 1918 but the emotional perils of modern warfare in 1914-18 did not reach the country where the winners of the domestic war celebrated their victory as a glorious independence struggle. 42. For examples from contemporary media, see *Studio55.fi*, 8 August 2013 : “Suomalaisissa edelleen sodan arpia – ‘Armottomuus heikkoutta kohtaan’ [http://www.studio55.fi/hyvinvointi/article/suomalaisissa-edelleen-sodan-arpia-armottomuus-heikkoutta-kohtaan/228384, accessed 17 March 2016]; *Sylvi.fi*, 11 March 2016: “Sota, mielenrauha ja murtuneet miehet” [http://sylvi.fi/2016/03/sota-mielenrauha-jamurtuneet-miehet/, accessed 17 March 2016]. 43. For British and Western zeal for public tears in contemporary media, see THOMAS DIXON, *Weeping Britannia : Portrait of a Nation in Tears*, Oxford, 2015, p. 299-316.

make choices that push for politicised and/or emotional responses from the media and the public. However, emotions history need not be emotional history. I agree that popular military historiography can, and should, help readers to assess their own identities *vis-à-vis* the past and collective memories. Sometimes it feels, however, as if popular historiography is expected to enable readers to weep the war away from their transgenerational memories. Trauma and emotional response form a rich field of historical research that still spark passions, yet emotions history concerns both short- and long-term change in emotional norms, styles, values and concepts.

Emotions – new turn in the cultural history of war ?

In the light of the emotional responses to novel ways of presenting military history, it is well worth looking at the latest fashionable but promising development in academia, the “emotional turn”, which has also established the history of emotions as a distinct field of history⁴⁴. So far the possibilities for co-operation between the cultural history of war and the history of emotions have been relatively weak, given the rather explicit connections they share. The politics of emotions, or the construction and maintenance of emotional

“styles” and “regimes”⁴⁵, and wartime experiences seem to offer an obvious link, for instance.

Obviously, as evidenced above, the histories of shellshock and war trauma form the backbone of current emotions histories of the twentieth-century warfare. This is perhaps the most thoroughly researched field in the cultural history of war that has enriched our understanding about the cultural and temporal variation in war-related trauma and medical history in general. It has also brought the history of the body into military history. Lesions of body and mind are inseparable⁴⁶. Other exercises in the history of emotions and war have focussed on certain emotions such as fear, or the analysis of soldiers’ and civilians’ historical motivations for fighting. The fear of the anonymity of faceless civilian bombings in modern warfare is a distinct feeling from the early-modern civilian fear of the enemy plunder. Yet, in terms of the history of emotions war is not only about dire experiences and trauma, it is sometimes as much about love, attachment, enthusiasm and collective fervour⁴⁷.

Further possibilities in terms of the history of emotions are promising but challenging.

44. For an overview, see JAN PLAMPER, *The History of Emotions : An Introduction* (transl. by Keith Tribe), Oxford, 2015. 45. For the concept of emotional style, see PETER N. STEARNS, *American Cool : Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style*, New York, 1994; for the concept of emotional regime, see WILLIAM M. REDDY, *The Navigation of Feeling : A Framework for the History of Emotions*, Cambridge, 2001, p. 124-129. 46. Literature is abundant, see e.g. VILLE KIVIMÄKI, *Battled nerves...*; PETER LEESE, *Shell Shock : Traumatic Neurosis and the British Soldiers of the First World War*, Rev. ed., London, 2014; EDGAR JONES & SIMON WESSELY, *Shell Shock to PTSD : Military Psychiatry from 1900 to the Gulf War*, New York, 2005; PAUL WANKE, *Russian/Soviet Military Psychiatry, 1904-1945*, London, 2005; see also JOANNA BOURKE, *Dismembering the Male : Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, London, 1996. 47. JOANNA BOURKE, *An Intimate History of Killing : Face-to-face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare*, London, 1999; ID., *Fear : A Cultural History*, London, 2005; VILLE KIVIMÄKI & TUOMAS TEFORA, “War of Hearts: Love and Collective Attachment as Integrating Factors in Finland During World War II”, in *Journal of Social History* 43, (2009) n° 2, p. 285-305; ID., *Sodan Henki...*



France donated Finland Morane-Saulnier fighters during the Winter War. Later the Finnish Air Force acquired more of them from German spoils of war supplies. These Finnish Morane-Saulnier fighters were photographed in Latvia airstrip during the Continuation War in September 1943. The swastika was the symbol of the Finnish Air Force from 1918 until 1945. SA-kuva. (Finnish Armed Forces photograph Archive)

They also provide historians with tools for communicating the challenges to a more general public without resorting to tautological trauma rhetoric. Nuancing the insight into the long-lasting emotional burden of war, the history of emotions may even challenge the public discourse on the emotional heritage of war. I mean, is it not worthwhile to ask whether the ongoing trauma debate is connected with the contemporary emphasis on memory politics and values stressing emotional responses, or are we truly experiencing a contemporary phase of healing after the post-war silences in the process of trans-generational trauma ?

When charting emotional change, the history of emotions has concentrated on long-term changes in emotional vocabulary, con-

cepts and norms of emotional expression and behaviour. Wars and crises may at first glance strike us as major emotional upheavals, but how do they fit in with the *longue durée* change of “emotional regimes” or “emotional styles” ? Are there certain emotional styles reflected in the emotional norms and concepts in history that can be traced back to wartime experiences ? What is the influence of emotional experience of the world wars on the construction of the late twentieth-century style of relative freedom of emotional expression in the West⁴⁸ ? One recent trend in the cultural history of war, adding to trauma studies, has indeed pointed towards the post-war periods with the focus on coping with a difficult past, re-creation and social, cultural and emotional change⁴⁹.

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48. Cf. CAS WOUTERS, *Informalization : Manners and Emotions since 1890*, London, 2007. 49. For an imposing early work, see JOHN W. DOWER, *Embracing Defeat : Japan in the Wake of World War II*, New York, 1999; also FRANK BIESS, *Homecomings : Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany*, Princeton, 2006; RICHARD BESSEL & DIRK SCHUMAN, (eds.), *Life after Death : Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s*, Cambridge, 2003; VILLE KIVIMÄKI & KIRSI-MARIA HYTÖNEN, (eds.), *Rauhaton rauha : Suomalaiset ja sodan päättyminen 1944-1950* [The Restless Peace : The Finns and the End of War, 1944-1950], Tampere, 2015.